CHAPTER 7

Media Relations

Because DNA technology is of such interest to the public, there are likely to be many DNA-related questions from the media. To minimize the potential for misunderstandings, there should be a single point of contact between the laboratory and the press, and laboratory staff should be instructed on how to respond if contacted directly by the media. Through press briefings, the laboratory director can help educate the public and manage expectations by providing a realistic picture of what DNA analysis can—and cannot—do.

One of the roles of the media is to inform the public about all aspects of a mass fatality incident response. Although media attention is likely to be focused on the ME, who generally has final responsibility for victim identification, the laboratory staff may also receive inquiries from the media. Therefore, staff members should know the laboratory's policy—and the policy of the authorities to which the laboratory reports—regarding contact with the press.

The ME may ask the laboratory director (or another person) to interact with the media on DNA-related matters, or the ME may choose to personally handle contact with the press. However, regardless of whether media contact occurs through the ME or a designated media relations person, the laboratory must be prepared to support responses with accurate, consistent information.

If the ME asks the laboratory director to respond to DNA-related press inquiries, the laboratory must establish policies for media access. It is important that all information released by the laboratory come from a single source, usually the laboratory director. When there is more than one point of contact with the media, information can appear to be contradictory or conflicting. Such misunderstandings can result in the loss of valuable time, as misinformation is corrected.

The media may also request laboratory visits to observe, photograph, or film the analytical processes. Such exposure may benefit the public or the DNA effort itself, but the laboratory director should expect that granting such requests will disrupt workflow significantly. If filming in the laboratory is authorized, staff should be given ample notice.

The following are examples of Web sites that contain information on DNA analysis and human identification. Such background information could be provided to the media to reduce the need for time-consuming on-location filming at the laboratory:

- **The President's DNA Initiative**
  http://www.dna.gov/

  Information on funding, training and assistance provided through the President's DNA Initiative. Tutorials for law enforcement, lawyers, and judges on the use of DNA evidence in trial. Information on case studies and many other resources, organized by "audience," including forensic scientists, officers and investigators, officers of the court, researchers, victim advocates, policymakers, and lawmakers.

- **Short Tandem Repeat DNA Internet DataBase**
  http://www.cstl.nist.gov/div831/strbase/

  Tutorials and PowerPoint presentations on forensic DNA analysis and the technologies used to create profiles.

- **101 science.com's DNA Tutorial**
  http://www.101science.com/dna.html

  Basics of DNA analysis, including video clips; links to other useful sites.

- **DNA Interactive**
  http://www.dnai.org/d/index.html

  Background information on DNA profiling, DNA kinship testing, and other information including video clips.

- **DNA From the Beginning**
  http://www.dnaftb.org/dnaftb/

  Interactive site that provides background tutorials, video clips, and photos.

In addition, these books contain information on DNA profiling and statistics:

- *Forensic DNA Typing Biology, Technology, and Genetics of STR Markers,* John M. Butler, Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, 2005.
- *Interpreting DNA Evidence: Statistical Genetics for Forensic Scientists,* Ian Evett and B.S. Weir, Massachusetts: Sinauer Associates, 1998.

The laboratory director may have access to a public relations specialist who can coordinate contact with the media. Public relations specialists can screen media requests, supply basic information, and schedule interviews. However, in the absence of such assistance, and at the request of the ME, the laboratory director should plan on devoting significant time to media relations.

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner had one spokesperson, the DNA laboratory director, who dealt with the press during the World Trade Center victim identification effort. We learned, early on, that because the same information can be presented in different ways—which can lead to different interpretations—it was critical to have one spokesperson.

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The laboratory director should approach each media interaction with the goal of providing accurate, consistent information. Questions should be answered honestly and completely, without releasing sensitive or unconfirmed information. It is important to remember that information given to the media also goes to the victims' families, so care must be taken to be respectful of sensitive family-related issues. The performance and activity metrics described in chapter 5, *Managing Expectations*, should be part of status updates to the media.

Briefing the media allows the laboratory director to educate the public and manage expectations by providing a realistic picture of what DNA analysis can—and cannot—do. For example, an explanation of the relationship between DNA results and the condition of human remains must be given in a way that respects grieving families. Through briefings with the media, the laboratory director can explain the limitations of DNA analysis as an identification method and can provide a realistic timetable for completing the DNA identification effort. The laboratory director may also want to raise the issue that there may be unidentified remains at the close of the effort.

A laboratory director should also be prepared to answer questions such as:

- How many victims have been identified?
- Have you identified the terrorists?
- How much time until the work is finished? Why is it taking so long?
- Will you be able to identify everyone? How many victims will you be able to identify? Why can't you identify all of them?
- What is the condition of the remains?
- Tell us about your emotional response. What is the mood like in the laboratory? How is your staff holding up under the pressure?

Commingled remains, while a confounding issue for DNA testing, may be a particularly sensitive issue for families. Expect that the media will focus on new or unusual technologies, seeking information on their reliability, when they will be brought online, and how many new identifications they will yield. In addition, some reporters may want to "scoop" their competition and, because of this and the pressure on them to meet short deadlines, there often is insufficient time for a story to be vetted as fully as the scientific community would like. Unfortunately, some of what gets printed or broadcast may contain errors. If this happens, the gulf between perception and reality can create anxiety and confusion among the victims' families and the general public.

The laboratory director can do a number of things to ensure that the media receive accurate information. Always state first whether the information being presented is for background or for attribution. Providing information "for background only" lets the laboratory director give more detailed explanations, but avoids having sentences quoted out of context. Interviewees also may request to review quotes that are going to be attributed to them, although this is not part of the journalistic process, and a laboratory director should not count on being able to review quotes.

In addition to supplying press releases through normal channels, the laboratory director or public relations liaison may want to contact news organizations that serve the geographic regions where victims lived or worked, in order to "speak" more directly to victims' families. Laboratory directors should also keep in mind that it may not be useful to grant an interview to every reporter who asks.

The most efficient way for the laboratory director to ensure that the public has the information it needs—and still have time to oversee the project—may be to issue daily press releases (see chapter 5, *Managing Expectations,* and exhibit 6). The consistent and timely release of information also is likely to reduce requests by the media. It may, for example, be useful for the laboratory director to issue a press release when the following events occur:

- The first remains arrive at the forensic laboratory.
- The first DNA identification is made (which, to the general public, likely will signify the beginning of the DNA identification process).
- The last of the remains arrive at the laboratory.
- The final remains are analyzed.
- New technologies are brought online.
- The laboratory makes its final DNA-based identification.
- The laboratory response effort ends.